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The Spirit of '72

LAST TUESDAY afternoon, the charter jet bearing the White House press corps landed at New York's La Guardia Airport and taxied to a stop at Butler Aviation, the haven of private fliers and political charters. Memories came flooding back of a September morning in 1968 when a candidate and his family christened The Tricia and The Julie, his two original campaign craft, and set off to win the nation's highest office. So much has changed in the three years since then. And yet the stop at Butler Aviation and other stops on last week's tour are reminders of how much remains the same.

The week's itinerary was New York, Illinois, Idaho, Wyoming, Texas and California, 4,500 miles and 145 electoral votes. Serviceable as it was, The Tricia has long since been returned to the commercial fleet of United Air Lines. Since Jan. 20, 1969, the Nixon steed has been Air Force One, recently renamed The Spirit of '76. Somebody suggested that the moniker is four years off the mark. Judging by some of the unadvertised content of the unadvertised content of last week's trip, it should have been named The Spirit of '72.

The President's journey was soft-sell barnstorming, at least in public. The President above politics is the best politics for an incumbent President, the adage goes. That was ignored last fall with unhappy results, so this year politics is a forbidden word. Besides, the taxpayers are footing the travel bills.

THE TRIP BEGAN with an almost-promise of parochial school aid to the Knights of Columbus in New York. There was a private meeting with Gov. Nelson Rockefeller in New York—and a counterpart meeting at the end of the trip with Gov. Ronald Reagan in California.

In Illinois, Mr. Nixon campaigned on a "nonpolitical" basis with Gov. Richard Ogilvie. They shared a motorcade into Springfield, the signing of a bill establishing Abraham Lincoln's Springfield home as a national monument, and a visit to the Illinois state fair on the traditionally politically-dominated "Governor's Day."

In keeping with White House wishes, there was a ban on partisan speeches until the President had left the scene. However, the Illinois Republican organization did not forget to give state workers time off to greet the President. The Republicans divided the motorcade route into sectors, with a party official given responsibility for the turnout in each one.

Mr. Nixon made two "drop-ins" at Idaho Falls, Ida., the first one a determinedly nonpartisan public rally featuring the newly elected Democratic governor and Democratic Sen. Frank Church as well as GOP officeholders. The Atomic Energy Commission is the biggest employer in town, and employees of the AEC and some of its subcontractors were bused from work direct to the airport rally to swell the crowd.

On the second stopover, the following day on the return trip from a scenic tour of Jackson Hole, Wyo., Mr. Nixon alighted from a helicopter and was deftly steered into an airport office for a private meeting with 15 prominent Republican officials. GOP National Committeeman David Little called the session "a pep talk in which Nixon urged the group to re-elect the state's Republicans."

Local record-keepers say Mr. Nixon had been to the state six times before—in 1950, 1954, 1960, 1962, 1966 and 1968. This was his first visit in an odd-numbered year, and his first as President.

In Texas, whose 26 electoral votes are important to next year's game plan, the President flew in, addressed the Veterans of Foreign Wars and left immediately. The state party officials and local leaders did not want him to come because of the unpopularity of his integration actions there.

THE ORATORICAL themes of last week's trip were national sacrifice, the spirit of competition and supremacy in the economic arena. The last was occasioned by the President's "new economic policy," which is a bid to save the economy from inflation, unemployment and obsolescence—and not, incidentally, to save Mr. Nixon from a very sticky problem with the voters next year.

There is nothing unprecedented or sinful about presidential politics, a President being the leader of his party as well as the leader of the nation as a whole. And if the need to face the voters produces diplomatic and economic activism on a four-year cycle, the nation can thank its lucky stars for politics and elections.

The lack of frankness at the moment is amusing, however. It reminds you of a song heard these days on the in-flight entertainment system of the presidential jet. "The Pentagon says we're winning the war, but that's stretching the truth a bit far," sings country-and-music star Jack Barlow. The punch line and title of the ballad is "Nobody Wants to Hear It Like It Is."